

The Lady Cantivv.

HAD I been napping? My head had fallen back, and my cap was awry. I had been in the garden all the afternoon gathering roses for *pot-pourri*, hoping that the absent might one day return to enjoy it, and thankful for occupation, as the summer days were long and lonesome in this remote spot, this great unpeopled house. When one is tired one easily falls asleep. But, then, how could I have been awakened by the horn of a coach?

Yet there it came again. Even in these days of extraordinary enterprise, who would run a coach through our out-of-the-world bit of country—a solitude leading, as one might say, from nowhere to nowhere else?

I put my cap straight and stood at the window, while again, louder and clearer, sounded the unusual music on the summer evening air. I left my sitting-room and stood at the open door of the great hall and looked out. Between mountainous walls of dark trees poured an avenue of sunshine across that bend in the hills where the sun was setting. Not from that side was the sound coming; but there again—tantivy—tantivy—tantivy! from the winding road that skirts the long miles of downs lying between us and —shire. My ears strained to catch the cheerful echo, and I wished I were a passenger by that coach out into the lively world. But another blast of the bugle and the roll of quick coming wheels, startlingly near, assured me that the coach in question had turned in at our gates, and was posting towards me.

I stepped forward and strained my neck to see the first appearance of the vehicle as it rounded the corner of the broad drive; and here it came, speeding towards the house, as fine a specimen of a four-in-hand as ever was turned out in style by a coaching club. It was covered with passengers on the outside, and faces were looking laughingly out of the windows. They had all the air of gay ladies and gentlemen out for amusement. As they drove up with a long flourishing blast of the horn, I was struck by the eccentricity of the dress of this coaching company: the men in

peculiarly shaped hats, high-collared coats and tight waists, the ladies with immense bonnets and scanty skirts. The horses were foaming, and I thought of the stables without grooms, nobody about but an old gardener and myself, and one woman-servant. I advanced a step, but nobody seemed looking at me, or even to perceive me. When the coach stopped a gentleman descended from the box-seat, opened the door of the coach, and handed out a lady, closed the door again, conducted her to the hall-door steps, left her there, and immediately remounted to his own seat. The driver gathered up the reins, the horn was blown, and the horses started. In a few moments the coach was out of sight, the sound of the retreating bugle grew fainter and fainter, and the lady remained standing on the doorsteps, alone and with her back to me.

When the horn was no longer audible she turned round, and came tripping up the steps, a charming young figure, her white muslin gown crisp and fresh with little frills and furbelows such as I had seen in pictures of my grandmother's days. Her blue sash and the little silk bag of the colour of forget-me-nots that hung from her waist had a coquettish grace, matching the curve of her long slender neck, round which golden ringlets clung, and the arch smile on her rose-mouth and in the eyes that were looking up at me. Her head-dress, a peculiar basket-like object, hung from her arm, as did a long, slim, white scarf of some silken fabric.

"I am coming to spend a night with you," she said, so sweetly that I was captivated at once. "I have travelled from what would seem to you a distance——"

"Pray come in, though I cannot promise you much in the way of entertainment," I said. "I am only caretaker in the home of my relative, who is abroad—unfortunately." My sigh, and the word "unfortunately" would, I hoped, remind her of the misfortunes of our house, of which she had probably heard.

"I know all about it," she answered. "I am a member of the family. As I said, I have come a long way, according to your ideas, to spend a night with you. Will you take me all over the old house, and talk to me about the family? I am more interested than I can tell you in the fortunes of my kindred."

"But, my dear child," I said, "where have you come from, if I may ask, and—pardon me—but how am I to know——?"

"That I am not a robber? Sit up, and watch all night—you and your servant and the old gardener. I am only one girl against the three of you. But, cousin, give me better treatment than this. You need have no doubt of me."

I felt ashamed of what she had seen in my eyes, and, wondering

still at her reticence, I ran over in my mind an outline of the various far-out branches of the family tree, trying to guess which of them had dropped me this blossom. I could not recall that any of my distant cousins owned a daughter of her age.

"No," she said, seeming, as before, to answer my thought, "you cannot place me among our relatives, and I do not intend to enlighten you to-night. To-morrow you shall know more about me. In the meantime, take me round the old garden before the daylight goes, and tell me everything you can about the present-day family."

I thought "present-day" a curious term to use, but noticing that she replied to my questions without informing me as to the point, I put on my cloak and gathered up my skirts, and led the way through the dewy alleys of green to the great old garden, which had of late become almost a wilderness. As we went she put her arm through mine, and with a curious thrill I noticed that I did not feel her do so, but only saw the action.

"You know, I dare say, that the present owner of this house is in trouble and in exile?" I explained.

"About a will," she remarked.

"An ancient will and title-deed. The documents were lost a hundred years ago."

"A hundred and nine years to the day," she replied, smiling at me.

"You are singularly accurate," I said; "but the chief thing that matters is the loss."

"How have they got on without it for a hundred years?"

"There was no one to dispute their right; but within the last few years a distant relative has sprung up and laid claim to what he declares was the inheritance of his grandfather. He pretends that the lost will was made in favour of this ancestor. He has succeeded in so far that he has got the estate into Chancery, and my cousin, having first been impoverished by years of law expenditure, has had to quit his old home with his wife and children, and is living almost in poverty in an obscure part of France."

I spoke with tears, and the bright eyes of my companion flashed sunshine into my face.

"You are tenderly attached to your cousin?"

"You may say so. My own story is an unhappy one, and when I became a widow I should have been homeless had not Geoffry Wetherwilder taken me in. I have lived in the family for years, and even now, when they have had to give up everything, he has contrived to secure me a shelter as caretaker of the Hall."

"Worthy Wetherwilders, both of you," said the girl, who also claimed to be a Wetherwilder, and she stooped to gather a splendid rose of the old, almost obsolete oriflamme, which was just in flower all over the Maiden's Bower, close to the French rosery. "How well I remember this rose!" and she kissed it.

"You have been here before!" I exclaimed in astonishment.

"Have I not! The happiest hours of my short life were spent in this garden."

"Really!"

"'Twas this rose that Geoffry Wetherwilder gave me, the evening—just such a June evening as this—when he told me he loved me; just a hundred and eight years ago."

I stared at her, and laughed. "What are you saying?" I asked impatiently.

"Perhaps I am talking poetry," she said; "may not one do so in such a spot, on such an evening, and after—?"

Her eyes roved over the garden, taking in all its beauties, and with a look behind their youthful brightness, of age and memory, which amazed and perplexed me.

"Talk as you please," I said, but I began to feel her uncanny.

"I have only a short time to be with you," she said quickly. "Let us enjoy it. I have been very happy in this place, though not so happy as we are now—I and my beloved. But love never forgets, and the things and places associated with it are eternally sweet. I shall take him these roses, and even in the place where we are now—"

I was trying to believe that here, in the days before I came to Wetherwilder Hall, this creature's romance had been enacted, though her apparent youth made folly of the idea. But I was growing quite bewildered by her looks and words, and was glad when she consented to leave the fading glories and the fragrance of the garden and to return with me indoors.

My handmaiden had provided a hasty supper—one or two light dishes, a sweetmeat, and grapes, coffee and shortbread. A great silver candelabra, with wax candles alight, stood in the middle of the round table in my sitting-room, which overlooked the garden, beyond which the great mounds of the trees were black against a golden stretch of sky. The flames of the candles hung like flowers in the air, for the gold sky-gleam was still at least equal with them in power of light within the room, and both together filled the place with a kind of mystic glamour.

We sat down to table, but I was too much excited to eat, and my guest, though plates were placed before her, seemed to behave as if they contained nothing but air. However, I had become

afraid of observing her too closely, so quickly did she apprehend my thought, and I allowed myself to drift with her humour.

After supper she protested that she must see the old house, and so we proceeded upstairs just as the newly burnished moon-silver began to struggle in the sky with the sun-gold which was rusting away into darkness down west among wildernesses of grotesque-seeming ink-black oak woods. The white glory poured down the wide way of the great staircase as we went up ; corridors, passages, and unused chambers lay beyond and above. I felt that I would rather have remained downstairs, but my companion hurried on, looking round here, and peeping in there, as if truly revisiting places that were dear and familiar to her.

She lingered only about a minute in each spot until we came to a small music-room, all brown with polished wood, without curtains or carpet, and hung round with musical instruments, some of them very old, an accumulation of years. Violin, guitar, mandolina, tambourine, cymbals, all were there, and an old-fashioned spinnet and a harp held place of honour in the middle of the floor.

With an air of rapture she stepped a-tiltœ across the floor, stretched her long delicate arm to take down the guitar from its hanging place, and slipping a faded blue ribbon that dangled from it over her head, she perched herself on a carved wooden stool, and sung with the most exquisite grace a soft, cooing love-song, the like of which for sweetness I had never listened to. When the piercing melody ceased she looked up at me, and never shall I forget the beauty of her as she did so, with the moonlight that struck through the narrow window just touching her face and shoulder. Her song sung, she replaced the guitar on the wall, and turning to me with a little laugh signed to me that she desired to quit the chamber.

Proceeding with our visitation we made little pause till we reached another small room, one which had been for generations a kind of schoolroom or study for the young people of the family. It was lined with books, and a table with drawers stood in the middle of the floor. Here had many a lesson been learned, and many a lecture listened to. Again, as in the music-room, the stranger's look of recognition became rapturous, as she walked round the rows of books with her eyes close to them, though I could scarcely imagine that the twilight from the window enabled her to read the titles of them.

Suddenly she drew forth from a corner, where it had evidently lain hid behind others, a small vellum-covered volume, and with a laugh of delight turned its pages over with a rapid hand, then placed it in mine with an eager movement, saying—

"Take it, cousin, and to-morrow look into it. It will explain away your perplexity."

I was growing weary of following her, of my ignorance of who she was and why she was here; and my wits were oppressed by the consciousness of something about her which I found quite unintelligible. I longed to be alone, that away from the fascination of her presence I might think the matter over, and arrive at some conclusion regarding her. I was, therefore, much relieved when she suddenly announced that she would retire for the night.

"Give me the yellow chamber," she said with her charming imperiousness.

I knew that my maiden had prepared for her a smaller room and nearer to my own, and remarked that she might perhaps feel lonesome in the greater apartment, which was situated at the other end of the house. But she reiterated her request, which was rather, indeed, a demand. In a short time the statelier chamber was made ready for her, and I accompanied her there. The yellow hangings on the bed and windows were let down and shaken out, but she would not allow the blinds to be drawn or the windows closed.

It is a splendid old room, the walls completely panelled in oak, the darkness of which is relieved by the gold-colour of the furniture. She bade me good-night, bending to kiss me, but I did not feel her lips, and experienced again that uncanny thrill at finding my sense of touch unaffected by her nearness. I last saw her standing there with her graceful arms extended dismissing me. Two candles were burning in the tall silver candlesticks on the dressing-table; the moon, full-orbed and glorious, shone out of the lovely green-grayness of the sky of a midsummer midnight, filling the framework of one window, while the other window showed the startling black fretwork formed by the huge boughs of a hundred-year-old chestnut tree against the silvery cloud-light. Between these and the flames of the candles the young slight figure stood, aerial in its lightness and grace, the face radiant with intelligence, the eyes of a brightness which seemed strange by such light as there was, the moon's soft ray making a luminous ring round her hair. She kissed her hand to me with a smile that is still in my heart; and then I closed the door and retreated to my own quarters, glad to escape, and feeling indescribably limp and overdone.

I did not find my brain cleared by solitude as immediately and effectively as I had hoped, and felt unable to do anything but huddle myself up in bed with a sense of the most utter prostration. After half an hour's rest I sat up and lit my candle, polished

my spectacles, and opened the vellum-covered book which the stranger had handed to me. But whether from fatigue or for some other reason, I could not read a word of the contents, and soon consigned myself once more to repose and darkness.

Sleep took me by surprise, and I knew no more till I wakened with a thin clear sound in my ears, curiously familiar as the repetition of something I had been aware of very lately. It was the lively sound of a coach-horn blown from a distance. Again it came lightly, and again and again more faintly on the air,—tantivy, tantivy, tantivy ! The great cedar outside flung its boughs about in the breeze, and their rustling drowned the retreating music. I sat up, and saw that the light of a midsummer dawn was gilding the edges of the window-blinds.

I dressed hurriedly, and feeling a strange reluctance to visiting the yellow chamber, I wakened my maid-servant and directed her to make me a strong cup of tea, which I swallowed nervously. The maid was a sturdy country wench, devoid of imagination, and she smiled at my discomfiture.

“It’s my belief you won’t find her, ma’am,” she said. “They gay friends of hers called for her and took her off, early. I heard the coachin'-horn an hour ago, comin’ an’ comin’, and goin’ an’ goin’. I put my head out of the winda, and I saw the coach, and the waft of her white gownd gettin’ into it; and the whole caravan went clatterin’ down the drive and out of sight among the trees just as the sun was risin’. And I wouldn’t be frettin’ for her, if I was you, ma’am, for she’s a queer kind of a visitor, takin’ people short and givin’ them trouble, and then goin’ off without as much as saying good morning to them !”

“Come up stairs with me, Jenny, that I may assure myself she is gone,” I said.

We entered the room. The windows still stood wide open, but their dark woodwork framed the brilliant sunshine and blue sky of a June morning. Rooks were cawing in the huge chestnut, which threw half the room into transparent shadow. The room was empty of its occupant of the night before. The bed had not been lain in, and everything stood undisturbed, as I had left it with her in it. And yet there was a change, for one of the panels in the wooded wall stood open as a door, showing a deep recess like a cupboard, about five feet above the level of the floor.

Thrilling with expectation of I knew not what, I looked into the open recess, and putting in my hand drew forth an Indian box containing some old yellow papers, the miniature of a girl, which was a faithful portrait of my late guest, and a few jewels in old-fashioned settings. Having read the papers, I telegraphed at

once to Geoffry Wetherwilder, and to his solicitor, and both arrived as quickly as steam could carry them. The papers found proved to be the long-lost will, so urgently needed for the welfare of our family.

It was long before I ventured to relate to my cousin, or to his man of business, the story of the finding of the document as I have set it down here. When I did so each received my communication characteristically. The solicitor laughed and tapped his forehead with an amused glance at me. "Don't tell that monstrous tale again, my dear lady," he said, "for I can't undertake to defend you from the consequences."

He accepted as quite natural the finding of the papers behind a sliding panel, but the rest he put down to a dream.

Geoffry, on the contrary, heard my story with the most serious attention, and received it as truth in all its details. He had the Celtic strain in him which readily responds to a message from the unknown. The spiritual side of his nature was deeply stirred, and having been made suddenly very happy just when his fortunes looked darkest, the heart in him turned gratefully, like my own, to the lovely visitant from another state of being, who had taken thought of him and his, and restored them to their own.

"Don't say a word of it to Vanda, however," he said, speaking of his wife, who was already on her joyful way home, with her little children. "The thought of such an occurrence in the house would be an everlasting terror to her." And the mistress of Wetherwilder remains in ignorance of the story to this day.

The vellum-covered book proved to be a diary kept in disjointed, schoolgirl fashion. Inside the cover was written, "Elsinore Wetherwilder, aged seventeen to-day. Called by some impertinent cousins 'the Lady Tantivy,' because she loves riding to hunt, and in a four-in-hand coach." And after this was added in a masculine youthful hand: "and sometimes even insists upon blowing the horn!"

The first entry was of an earlier date than the inscription on the cover:

"This week I have arrived at Wetherwilder Hall. It is a change indeed for an orphan girl leaving her convent school with no family or relatives to receive her. What should I have done, where should I have gone, had not the dear old squire arrived at Avignon, and put me in his portmanteau and carried me home? Really, and really home. And such a home!"

"I am wild with delight. I have a ready-made mother, and the big-boy cousins are brothers to me. And the best of it is they are all as happy as I am, for the Wetherwilders had no daughter until I came."

Various girlish and pretty writings followed, filling up a year. In the first winter, this :

“The snow is deep, yet the ball came off. The squire gave me a wonder of a white satin dress. My head is turned with flatteries. The duke proposed to me, but I should have refused him had he been king of the world, and that though he is a very goodly gentleman. It is Geoffry that I love, and never another man than Geoffry. If Geoffry does not love me, then will I back to my convent at Avignon and cover up this golden hair with a nun’s veil——”

The next summer :

“This evening Geoffry told me that he loved me. It was in the garden among the oriflamme roses. I knew it before, but it was sweet to hear it——”

In the following autumn :

“I have been trying to plague Geoffry. He is so sweet-tempered one can hardly do it. I have hidden the will and documents he was showing me yesterday. I have put them behind the sliding panel in the yellow chamber, where I am now installed. As all his inheritance depends on them, he will be rather in a fright. I will tease him for a while, and then make amends by being ever so kind to him.”

No more. Each time I close the little book, which I always keep by me with the miniature, I think I hear the faint horn blowing that announced the coming and going of my Lady Tantivy. She will never come again. When we meet, it must be that I shall go to her. Time and place are delusions. I am very old now, and as I gaze over the trees into the great space out of which she came in her ever-young delightfulness, my heart grows young and is glad.

ROSA MULHOLLAND GILBERT.